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SUBJECT: SLOVAK PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: GASPAROVIC AND RADICOVA
ADVANCE TO SECOND ROUND

REF: BRATISLAVA 115

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Incumbent President Ivan Gasparovic and center-right opposition candidate Iveta Radicova have advanced to the second round of the Slovak presidential elections. Gasparovic took 46.7 percent of the vote in the March 21 first round, with Radicova receiving 38 percent in the seven-candidate field. Gasparovic will be favored to win the April 4 run-off election, but Radicova's reformist message, strong showing in major cities, and overwhelming support among the Hungarian-speaking minority in southern Slovakia suggests that a well-organized get-out-the-vote campaign could produce a close finish. Gasparovic will continue to take advantage of all the advantages of incumbency (such attending the upcoming NATO Summit in Strasbourg) to emphasize his credentials as the sitting head of state, and he can count on the strong support of popular Prime Minister Robert Fico and his ruling Smer party.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Incumbent President Ivan Gasparovic garnered 46.7 percent of the vote March 21 in the first round of the Slovak presidential elections. He was followed by Iveta Radicova, supported by 38 percent of voters. Turnout was moderate, with approximately 44 percent of the potential electorate going to the polls on a chilly but largely sunny day throughout most of the country. No other candidate received more than five percent of the vote in the seven-person field. Gasparovic and Radicova will square off April 4 in the second round of voting.

¶3. (U) The Slovak presidential campaign, which did not legally begin until March 6 (reftel), was almost too short to be substantive. As one Slovak analyst noted, "this isn't really a campaign, it's just an introduction to the candidates." As such, the meatiest issues to surface during the short campaign period dealt with the candidates' past professional (and, in some cases, personal) lives, rather than their plans for the future. Moreover, because the powers of the Slovak president are largely protocolary and ceremonial, candidates were limited in their ability to make significant commitments or offer any real policy prescriptions.

¶4. (SBU) Gasparovic, who entered 2009 with near-universal name recognition and a significant lead in the polls, ran a classic incumbent's race. In the run-up to the start of the formal campaign period he increased his official public (and thus televised) appearances, linked himself to the extremely popular government of Prime Minister Robert Fico, and tried to avoid being drawn into any sort of controversy. The one exception to this approach was Gasparovic's largely symbolic refusal to sign a law mandating that school textbooks in Hungarian-speaking regions include both Hungarian and Slovak place names for cities and towns; while probably heartfelt, his nominal veto also appeared designed to appeal to nationalist voters, emphasizing his role as a head of state defending the (ethnic Slovak) nation. And with the global economic crisis now being felt more directly and painfully in Slovakia, his recent campaign messaging emphasized his commitment to social welfare policies, as well as the importance of continuity in the presidency during a time of financial uncertainty.

¶5. (U) Radicova, a former Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family in the government of ex-Prime Minister Dzurinda and a member of his center-right SDKU party, adopted a "stay above the fray" approach and refused to engage in personal attacks on her main opponent. But when she promised that, if elected, she would pursue a cooperative relationship with Fico and his social democratic government, she had to contend with Fico's caustic reply that he could never be able to work with her. She also faced vocal opposition from some elements of the Catholic church -- most significantly the Bishop of Banska Bystrica -- for her pro-choice views on abortion and her willingness to accept certain gay social and civil rights.

¶6. (U) During a series of televised "debates" (which, like their American counterparts, were little more than joint interviews), Gasparovic faced some critical questions about his past. Frantisek Miklosko (a former Christian Democrat who eventually finished third, with 5.4 percent of the vote) pressed Gasparovic on his involvement in some of the more controversial events of the notorious Meciar era. Gasparovic had served as second-in-command within Meciar's HZDS party from 1992-1998, before the two had a very public and bitter falling out. Miklosko pointedly questioned Gasparovic's role in the amnesties granted those involved in the 1995 kidnapping of then-President Kovac's son (widely believed to have been ordered by Meciar) and the illegal and extra-constitutional expulsion of a dissident HZDS deputy from the Slovak parliament in 1997.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite some skeletons in Gasparovic's closet, his close ties with the ever-popular Fico and the significant advantages of incumbency have given him a first round win, although not an out-right victory. Radicova ran a modern, professional campaign, experimenting with social networking technologies. She successfully

BRATISLAVA 00000143 002 OF 002

used her reformist image and support among Slovak celebrities in ads appealing to young and urban voters in key cities such as Bratislava, Kosice, and Banska Bystrica, but not really resonating in the countryside or eastern Slovakia. She also captured overwhelming majorities among the Hungarian-speaking electorate (which makes up about 10 percent of the population), receiving over 80 percent of the vote in at least three southern regions.

¶8. (SBU) While Gasparovic remains the favorite to win on April 4, Fico's decision to personally and actively engage in the presidential campaign demonstrates that the governing coalition takes Radicova's reformist candidacy seriously. Given that the third and fourth place candidates secured almost 11 percent of the first-round vote, who they endorse could prove quite telling, and there are indications that they and their voters may be inclined toward Radicova's anti-incumbent message. Early commentary and analysis suggests that most Slovaks -- even Gasparovic supporters -- believe Radicova has a real chance of winning, which could increase turnout on April 4 and make for a close, interesting election. END COMMENT.

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